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^After Long Effort, Minnesota's Charter School Experiment Under Way< \*

^EDs: Also moved in advance for weekend use. With DC-MN--Charter  
Schools-Glance; DC-MN--City Academy.<

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MINNEAPOLIS (AP) - More than a year after state lawmakers approved the idea, Minnesota this month took a big step in an experiment to create a new kind of school.

It's a public school.

But it's run by a panel of parents and teachers, not by a school district.

It's funded by tax dollars.

But it's not governed by most of the rules and regulations that cover ordinary public schools.

In the language of educators, it's a "charter school." And, like other radical breaks from the traditions of education, the idea has run into skepticism.

"There's more than one good way to educate a child," said Peggy Hunter, enrollment options specialist with the Minnesota Department of Education. "Some districts may feel when a charter school is suggested that they're not doing a good job, when it may be that parents just want an alternative."

The idea of charter schools is being studied across the nation. Legislation has been considered this year in California, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Tennessee, Connecticut, New Jersey and Massachusetts. The idea also has been discussed in Chicago, Baltimore and Milwaukee.

Under Minnesota's law, the state Board of Education may approve eight charter schools. To open a charter school, licensed teachers must get sponsorship of a school district, then approval by the state board. Teachers then go back to the sponsoring district to work out legal details of the contract.

The per-pupil state aid goes with the student to fund the charter school. The schools may set their own hours, may be open year-round and have greater leeway in using their facilities and resources than do traditional public schools.

However, they must give everyone who applies an equal chance of being admitted, are subject to laws on discrimination, can't offer religious instruction, can't charge tuition and can't restrict students based on academic or athletic ability.

The contract between the charter school and the sponsoring district spells out the school's program and goals. The school is accountable to the sponsor, its students and their parents for achieving those results.

"The students have to meet state standards, but they do not have to meet them in the current way of having to have so many hours of math, science," said state Rep. Becky Kelso, who sponsored the bill in the Minnesota House of Representatives.

The State Board of Education so far has approved four charter school proposals. The first, City Academy in St. Paul, opened this month to serve about 30 students who have dropped out or been kicked out of traditional schools.

Metro School for the Deaf, to be located in the Twin Cities area, and Toivola-Meadowlands, an existing St. Louis County school serving students in kindergarten through 12th grade that will switch to charter school status, expect to open as charter schools in 1993. The board has approved a proposal by Bluffview Montessori, a private elementary school in Winona, to become a charter school, but that proposal was rejected by the local school board.

The biggest roadblock for charter school proposals has been getting district sponsorship, Hunter said.

'For many districts, they see these charter schools as taking away their money,' she said. 'With really tight times, they see the loss of any money as a detriment to programming. They also see it as loss of power and control.'

Both teacher unions in Minnesota, the Minnesota Education Association and the Minnesota Federation of Teachers, have opposed the charter school concept, saying it's not necessary.

'Basically, I believe the school boards have the authority to provide these kinds of opportunities without the need for a charter school,' said MEA President Robert Astrup.

'We have over 45 alternative high schools in Minnesota, so we wondered right along whether it was ever a necessary piece of legislation. The large number of alternative schools is evidence that we're responding' to the need, Astrup said.

Sandra Peterson, president of the Minnesota Federation of Teachers, said she is concerned about deregulation of education and believes the same goals can be accomplished within the traditional public school system.

'School superintendents and school boards are often incumbered by rules and regulations,' she said. 'I think if you're going to give charter schools the leeway, you have to do it for other schools too.'

Peterson also noted that Minnesota already allows students to attend schools outside their home districts, a fact that he says forces districts to maintain competitive programs.

The debate over charter schools has been complicated by the novelty of the concept.

'It's like saying 'What's a house?'' said Ted Kolderie, a consultant on school reform based in St. Paul. 'You make it what you want; you design it to be what you want it to be. There's no defined thing.'

'In some ways it's new and different and puzzles people, but in some ways it's very simple,' he added. 'It's just the idea that it's OK for somebody else to offer public education. It's OK to start up a different school new. The districts are very cautious about wanting to do this, so you have to have somebody else if you're going to have innovation and change.'

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